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A LETTER
FROM HON. ROBERT TOOMBS,
OF GEORGIA.

WASHINGTON, Ga., May 10th, 1864.

To His Excellency, Jos. E. Brown:

SIR:—I tender you my sincere thanks for the ability, firmness, and success with which you have supported the cause of personal liberty in your opposition to the law passed by the late Congress entitled "an act to suspend the privilege of the writ of Habeas Corpus in certain cases." Among your many and well-merited claims upon the confidence and gratitude of the people of Georgia and of the whole Confederacy, for your great, valuable and unwearied service to the cause of Southern liberty and independence during this war, none will rank higher or endure longer than this noble defense of the most valuable of all human rights. In addition to the conclusive arguments submitted by yourself in your message to the Legislature, and by Vice President Stephens in his eloquent and exhaustive speech before the same body against this law, I think some of the objections to it may be further discussed with advantage to the truth; especially in view of the numerous assaults which have been made upon both of you by the friends of this measure.

If this act had done nothing more than suspend the privilege of the writ in all cases where the Confederate Government had the constitutional right to arrest, detain, try and punish, then no question, certainly no judicial question could have arisen on the power to pass it. In the adoption of our constitution the warning voice of that apostle of liberty, Thomas Jefferson, was unheard or unheeded. We did not secure the "eternal, unremitting force of the Habeas Corpus laws." We omitted to impose this among other "fetters against doing evil which no good government should decline." The privilege of the writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended unless when in case of rebellion or invasion the public safety may require it." Thus saith the constitution. The Confederate States are invaded; whether or not the public safety by reason of that invasion did require either a total or limited suspension of the writ was a question which Congress had a right to decide. The power is clear—whether it be given by express or implied, positive or negative grant, is wholly immaterial in this particular case, and does in no wise affect the limitation or true construction of the grant itself. The power being clear, Congress is responsible for its legitimate exercise alone to the people. To this tribunal it should be all the more strictly held, both because it is the sole one to which it can be made answerable, and because of the magnitude of the interests involved. It is due to Congress and to candor to express my firm conviction that the chief errors and unconstitutional features of the act now under review, originated wholly in the want of attention to cardinal principles, and in a total misapprehension of the legal character and effect of the writ of Habeas Corpus. This conclusion is clearly demonstrable from the previous legislation and other proceedings of that Congress on the same subject; and it becomes more important to present it, because it is from this stand point alone that we can get a clear view of the intentions and purposes of the legislature, and consequently a correct exposition of the act itself. The truth is, Congress in its first act on this subject, assumed that the total suspension of "the privilege of the writ of Habeas Corpus" in fact suspends the whole constitution, established martial law, and invested the President with dictatorial powers. That law was enacted within five days after our permanent government was inaugurated, is the second law on the statute book passed by that Congress, and it is in these words, to-wit:

Be it enacted, &c., "That during the present invasion of the Confederate States the President shall have power to suspend the privilege of the writ of Habeas Corpus in such cities, towns, and military districts as shall, in his judgment, be in such danger of attack by the enemy as to require the declaration of martial law for their effective defense."

This act is an authoritative exposition of the original opinions of that Congress upon the character of the writ of Habeas Corpus, and demonstrates the accuracy of my statement of the true source from whence has sprung such fatal blows against the long existence of constitutional government.

Congress itself soon became restive and alarmed at its own action, and within a few days after the passage of this law a bill was introduced entitled "an act to limit the act authorizing the suspension of the writ of Habeas Corpus." Their conception of the danger of this first law was neither clear or comprehensive, but it was strong and active. They limited its operation "to arrests made by the authorities of the Confederate government or for offences against the same," and limited its duration to "thirty days after the next meeting of Congress," and passed this supplemental act through the 19th of April, 1862, within less than sixty days after the date of the first act, and when the public enemy were marching on the capital with the most numerous and best appointed army which had then ever been assembled on the American continent, and while the sound of his guns were actually and literally reverberating through their legislative halls. This showed at least earnestness, zeal, sincerity, and truly an honest and manly effort to correct former errors. This effort was far from being wholly unavailing; the supplemental act did mitigate the evils of the original act, and put an end to its existence in August next thereafter. But Congress was again induced to pass another act suspending this great writ on the 13th of October, 1862. This act omitted the concession of the power of the President to declare martial law contained in the first act, adopted all the limitations on the power limited in the supplemental act of the 19th April, and engraven a new provision upon it, really intended to redress wrongs by discharging persons "improperly detained," but which was in fact only a delusive mockery of justice.

This law also expired by its limitation in February, 1863, when Congress was again importuned and urged to suspend the writ. But our representatives began to manifest increased repugnance to the measure, and flatly refused. The citizen then remained a whole year in the enjoyment of

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this ancient muniment of his right to personal liberty, of this security against arbitrary imprisonment. But the President was inexorable. He again demanded the surrender of "this palladium of our liberties." Congress had already granted too much to refuse anything. They had already surrendered to him the whole male population of the Confederate States between the ages of 17 and 60 (with but few exceptions,) to be put in or out of the army at his pleasure, and whether in the army or in workshops, to be governed by officers or taskmaster of his appointment. They had given him unlimited control over the entire property of the country by taxation and a general lease (the impressment act) to plunder the inhabitants of these States at his own will and pleasure. But this was not enough. The soldiers even had still some rights—they were only under military law. The courts could protect even them against encroachments upon their rights and liberties which military law had left them. The old men and the boys were still protected by the Constitution and laws. The officers necessary to the preservation of the forms of the State governments, were still free; the exempts, the lame, the halt and the blind were still free. The women were still free, and might become dangerous to tyranny. To all these the portals of justice were still wide open; and the ancient and benevolent writ of Habeas Corpus was still keeping "watch and ward" in her temples, and setting free the innocent captives of despotism. The President demanded again that these temples should be closed.

The Legislature imprudently yielded to his demand, and committed graver offences than impropriety in the act of surrender. It is true that by this time Congress had discovered and admitted two radical errors in their former legislative attempts to suspend the writ, and had made an effort to repair the breaches thus made in the constitution. Both branches passed resolutions by large majorities, declaring that there existed no power anywhere under our form of government to establish martial law. This declaration condemned and cast out one of these errors. It is true that was but a simple declaration, that our constitution made no provision for its own dissolution or suspension, or for a military despotism, but it was appropriate and necessary to exclude the conclusion flowing from the language of the first act suspending the writ, and still more necessary for the condemnation of the constant exercise of this arbitrary and usurped power by the President, and both his military and civil officers, throughout the Republic. They also declared in the preamble of the last suspension act, "that the power of suspending the privilege of the said writ of Habeas Corpus as recognized in Article 1, is vested solely in the Congress, which is the exclusive judge of the necessity of such suspension," thereby putting their own deliberate and emphatic condemnation upon both of their former acts upon the same subject, for both of these acts conferred "the power in the President to suspend the privilege of the writ of Habeas Corpus whenever in his judgment the public safety may require it." This section of the constitution is clearly demonstrable from the previous legislation and other proceedings of that Congress on the same subject; and it becomes more important to present it, because it is from this stand point alone that we can get a clear view of the intentions and purposes of the legislature, and consequently a correct exposition of the legal character and effect of the writ of Habeas Corpus. 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